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“I am Rwandan”: Unity and Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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Drawing on a corpus of ten oral interviews with survivors and perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, we examine how the government's policy of unity and reconciliation has shaped post-genocide identities and intergroup relations in local Rwandan communities. By focusing on the relationships between individuals and the national post-genocide narrative, we show how the socio-political context in Rwanda influences how people locate themselves and how they ascribe rights and duties to and in relation to others. Specifically, we use positioning theory as an interpretive lens to argue that individuals view adherence to the government's post-genocide narrative of unity and reconciliation as a moral duty, which is vital to continued political stability and economic development in Rwanda. Our discussion focuses on explaining how the social positioning of the national post-genocide narrative may function to reinforce the ethnic tensions the government has pledged to eradicate.

Key words: Rwanda, Genocide against the Tutsi, unity and reconciliation, positioning theory, *ndi umunyarwanda*

The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda was one of the most intimate genocides of the twentieth century. Not only were an extraordinary number of people killed in a very short period of time, often in the most brutal ways imaginable, but also the Rwandan government at the time of the genocide was able to incite mass involvement of civilians in the killings.¹ In a period of just three months, between April and July 1994, as many as one million people were murdered, often by loved ones, relatives, neighbors or friends. The majority of the victims were Tutsi, but some Hutu were also killed. Following military victory in July 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front was faced with the seemingly impossible challenge of restoring peace, stability, and unity to a highly divided and traumatized country. The healing process for a collective trauma such as genocide is understandably long and complicated: survivors need to come to terms with their trauma and manage the physical, social, and emotional pain they have experienced; governments are challenged with creating constructive ideologies and rebuilding harmonious intergroup relations.² The scale of the genocide in Rwanda has meant that survivors and perpetrators now find themselves having to live side by side, with survivors sometimes dependent on perpetrators and their relatives for support, particularly in rural areas.³

Reconciliation is broadly defined as the restoration of trust and positive relations between formerly adversarial groups⁴ and is therefore a dynamic process that requires change to occur at both individual and societal levels. In 1999, the Rwandan government founded the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation (NURC), which has implemented several programs aimed at changing the emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of all its citizens. The stated role of the NURC is “to foster unity and reconciliation among the people of Rwanda who had experienced long periods of bad governance characterized by divisions, discriminations, human rights abuse and acts of violence.”⁵ At the core of NURC policies is the promotion of a unified national identity: *Ndi Umunyarwanda*, which means, “I am Rwandan” (not Hutu, Tutsi or Twa). One of the aims of the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* program is to help the Rwandan people, particularly youth, to better understand their origins. As such, it supports the RPF government’s narrative of the Genocide against the Tutsi, which looks back to pre-colonial Rwanda when, it is claimed, social divisions were based on economic status rather than any notion of ethnic difference. Ethnic differences, according to the officially sanctioned narrative, were invented and reinforced by colonial authorities.⁶

In this article, we discuss a corpus of ten interviews with both survivors and perpetrators of the 1994 genocide to examine how Rwandan citizens are positioned in relation to the government’s narrative of unity and reconciliation. Our analysis draws on

¹ Alette Smeulers and Lotte Hoex, “Studying the Microdynamics of the Rwandan Genocide,” *British Journal of Criminology* 50, no. 3 (2010), 435.

² Ervin Staub, “Building a Peaceful Society: Origins, Prevention, and Reconciliation after Genocide and Other Group Violence,” *American Psychologist* 68, no. 7 (2013), 576.

³ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Africa* 76, no. 2 (2006), 131.

⁴ Herbert C. Kelman, “Reconciliation From a Social-Psychological Perspective,” in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*, ed. Arie Nadler et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

⁵ The Rwandan Government: National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, *About Us*, accessed January 10, 2017, <http://www.nurc.gov.rw/index.php?id=73>.

⁶ Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Nation, Narration, Unification? The Politics of History Teaching after the Rwandan Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (2009), 31. Nigel Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*, (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

positioning theory,⁷ which provides a methodology for analyzing qualitative data. In positioning theory, everyday social interactions can be understood as unfolding episodes of an overarching storyline. Of particular relevance to our analysis is the claim that the positioning of a category of persons can be deliberately enacted through decisions and policies made by government institutions. This theory can help us understand how the Rwandan government's policy on national unity and reconciliation has served to shape individuals' post-genocide identities and social interactions. As we will argue in this paper, the Rwandan government's policy on unity and reconciliation positions citizens with a moral duty to uphold the tenets of this policy for the good of their country. Focusing on the relationships between individuals and the Rwandan national narrative, we show that the socio-political context in Rwanda influences how people locate themselves and how they ascribe rights and duties in relation to others. By analyzing the interviews within the context of the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* program, we reflect on the political and social implications of the national storyline of unity and reconciliation for different social groups in Rwanda. These implications range from intergroup harmony between survivors and perpetrators to more harmful consequences, such as ostracization, for people who refuse to conform to the national storyline.

Social Positioning

Positioning theory focuses on decoding the implicit and explicit meanings of people's actions towards one another by attending to the features of the local context that, in a particular moment, are being either conformed to or resisted.⁸ These features include the rules, social norms and conventions of appropriate conduct in a given context. According to positioning theory there is a clear distinction between what it is logically possible for a person to say or do in a particular context and what is socially permissible in that same context. In the Rwandan context, it is logically possible to speak out against the government and it might be socially permissible to do so among a trusted group of friends, but it would not be permissible to disagree with the government in a public forum, as you would risk being arrested. Furthermore, a central principle of positioning theory is that the constraints of a context or social role mean that not all individuals participating in a social interaction will have equal access to the full repertoire of possible actions in that moment.⁹ To return to and elaborate on our previous example, while it might be logically possible for a citizen to disagree with the government in a public setting, in so far as they could exercise their free will to express their opinion, the severity of the action that might be taken by the government in response to such an action effectively operates to deny the right to speak out to the individual in that context. The

⁷ Rom Harré and Fathali M. Moghaddam, "Introduction: The Self and Others in Traditional Psychology and in Positioning Theory," in *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts*, ed. Rom Harré and Fathali M. Moghaddam (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 1–11.

⁸ Rom Harré et al., "Recent Advances in Positioning Theory," *Theory & Psychology* 19, no. 1 (2009), 5–31.

⁹ Rom Harré, "Positioning Theory: Moral Dimensions of Social-Cultural Psychology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, ed. Jaan Valsiner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 191–206.

position held by an individual determines the extent of the rights, duties and cultural resources (i.e., the identity) that she or he is permitted to express in a particular context at a particular moment in time. Thus, an ordinary Rwandan citizen is denied the agency and power to disagree with the government in public and therefore is afforded only the identity of an obedient and law-abiding citizen in this context.

Given the varied nature of human interaction, different types of positioning can occur in particular situations.¹⁰ Of particular relevance to this article is the deliberate positioning that occurs when the duties and rights of a category of persons are positioned through decisions and policies implemented by government institutions.¹¹ This form of positioning pushes an individual to engage in forced moral positioning, where their utterances make reference to rights and duties they feel obliged to enact given their designated role in society.¹² In this article, we interpret the Rwandan government's policy of national unity and reconciliation as a storyline that functions to set the cultural stage for the ways in which survivors and perpetrators are positioned to act towards one another. We use this cultural context as an interpretative framework with which to understand how the Rwandan government's policy on national unity and reconciliation has served to shape individuals' post-genocide identities and social interactions. As we will demonstrate in this article, the government's policy on unity and reconciliation positions citizens with a moral duty to uphold the tenets of this policy for the good of the country.¹³

The Corpus of Interviews

Our analysis is based on ten oral interviews with individuals who self-identified as either survivors or perpetrators of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. All the interviewees had since joined grass-roots associations that aim to promote unity and reconciliation in their home communities. These cooperative associations mobilize survivors and perpetrators to work together voluntarily on projects that benefit the community such as building houses for orphans of the genocide. The interviews were obtained from the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, which went online in 2010 and contains a wealth of original documents, testimonies, recordings and materials relating to the genocide. It is managed by UK-based NGO, the Aegis Trust. Participation in the interviews was voluntary; interviewees did not receive payment for their participation. The Genocide Archive Rwanda identified ten associations and contacted the president of each association to ask if they and their members would be willing to be interviewed. The president of each association then invited some of his/her members to be interviewed. Given that the authors of the present article were not involved in data collection for this project, we do not know how the presidents of participating associations selected members to be interviewed, nor whether

¹⁰ Rom Harré and Luk Van Langenhove, "Varieties of Positioning," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 21, no. 4 (1991), 393–407.

¹¹ Harré and Moghaddam, "Introduction: The Self and Others in Traditional Psychology and in Positioning Theory."

¹² Gregor Zelle, "Exploring the Application of Positioning Theory to the Analysis of Organisational Change." (paper, Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference, Adelaide, Australia, 2009).

¹³ Susan Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Resistance to Reconciliation in Postgenocide Rwanda*, (Maidson, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

members felt socially obligated to participate. However, it is possible that members might share only a positive view of their current situation and relationships with others if they felt pressured to participate at the request of their president. We further discuss the limitations of our data when presenting our findings and conclusions.

These ten interviews are the full corpus of interviews available from the Genocide Archive Rwanda on this topic to date, and all the interviews were conducted in group settings with members of unity and reconciliation associations at their usual meeting place. The interviews ranged in length, with the shortest lasting 45 minutes and the longest lasting around 90 minutes. Across the ten interviews, there are 19 men and 16 women with 20 interviewees identifying as survivors, 10 identifying as perpetrators, 4 as family members of perpetrators, and 1 person who spoke too briefly to be categorized. Staff members from the Archive, themselves genocide survivors, conducted these ten interviews in 2014 to mark the twentieth commemoration of the 1994 genocide, Kwibuka 20, the theme of which was “Remember, Unite, Renew.” The fact that the interviews were conducted by survivors during the commemoration period may have influenced interviewees’ responses by encouraging survivors and perpetrators to censor their true feelings and adopt a more favorable view on reconciliation than they otherwise might have had. However, all those interviewed had all already signed up to unity and reconciliation associations suggesting that they already subscribed to the Rwandan government’s narrative. Given this context, it is unsurprising that we found very little variation in response.

The interviews were conducted and recorded in the individuals’ native language, Kinyarwanda. With the permission of the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, we commissioned the translation of these interviews into English. We used a rigorous translation process: first, the audio files were transcribed verbatim into written Kinyarwanda. Second, a staff member from the Genocide Archive of Rwanda checked the quality of the transcribed documents. Third, we employed two local translators who each translated the interviews into English. Finally, the accuracy of the translations was ensured through the employment of a further translator who back-translated the interviews from English into Kinyarwanda. Any discrepancies between the translations and Kinyarwanda transcripts were discussed with both authors, and changes only made when it was agreed that the translation had altered the meaning of the original source text. All the interviewees had signed formal consent forms prior to the interview, in which they agreed for their interview to be stored online by the Genocide Archive of Rwanda and accessed by third parties such as educators and researchers. Despite the participants’ informed consent and in the interest of protecting their confidentiality, we have removed personal information from the extracts of the interviews presented in this article. We have numbered the interviews from one to ten and we identify the extracts by these numbers. Readers can therefore identify which extracts are taken from the same association, but the anonymity of the interviewees is protected.

The staff at the archive used a semi-structured interview, in which they asked all individuals to describe how their community association had started, why they had chosen to join the association and what they thought were the benefits of being a member of such an association. Thus, although the interviews were conducted in groups, the interviewer was focused on collecting the personal viewpoints and experiences of each member, rather than interviewing members in the capacity as official representatives of

their respective associations. The semi-structured interview enabled staff to collect responses to the areas of interest (outlined above), but it also gave the staff freedom to ask their own questions or follow up questions if something an interviewee said was interesting and relevant to the topic of unity and reconciliation. Although the interviews were focused on showcasing successful stories of post-genocide reconciliation, the interviewers did ask people to be candid when sharing their reasons for joining the association and whether they had had any reservations about doing so. Given the context and purpose of these interviews, we acknowledge that they do not represent the full range of possible attitudes to the Rwandan government's policies on unity and reconciliation, and our conclusions should be considered in light of this fact. They do, however, offer some useful insight into how individual Rwandans endorse the government's policy. Before turning to the narratives that emerge from the individual interviews, we will first outline the Rwandan government's storyline of unity and reconciliation against and within which these individual stories are positioned.

Unity and Reconciliation

In a stated attempt to avoid repeating history, the Rwandan government has tasked the NURC with the implementation of policies and programs designed to educate, sensitize and mobilize citizens to work towards unity and reconciliation in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. All the programs implemented by the commission work towards one broader goal: to foster social cohesion through the removal of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa ethnic labels in favor of identification with a national Rwandan identity. For example, the aims of the *Ingando* program were to re-educate a diverse range of groups on the role of former colonial powers in creating distinct Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities, and to stress the importance of good governance in moving forward and rebuilding Rwanda.¹⁴ According to the Rwandan government, Hutu and Tutsi civilians lived together in peace and unity before the genocide, such that external forces, including both the German then Belgian colonial powers and the former leaders of the Hutu genocidal regime are seen as solely responsible for the divisionism that fueled the genocide. However, critics of the government's policy have pointed to the tension between a forward-looking narrative calling for the elimination of ethnicity and a retrospective narrative of the history of the genocide,¹⁵ which runs the risk of associating all Hutu with the perpetration of genocide and all Tutsi with victimhood.¹⁶

Fourteen years after the creation of the NURC, on June 30, 2013, during a Youth Connect conference in the Rwandan capital of Kigali, president Paul Kagame invited all Hutu, especially young people, to apologize publicly on behalf of their parents and relatives for crimes committed during the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994.¹⁷ At the end of the conference, well known Hutu poet, actor, filmmaker and now Rwandan MP,

¹⁴ Eugenia Zorbas, "What Does Reconciliation after Genocide Mean? Public Transcripts and Hidden Transcripts in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (2009), 127–47.

¹⁵ Lars Waldorf, "Revisiting *Hotel Rwanda*: Genocide Ideology, Reconciliation, and Rescuers," *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (2009), 101–25. Zorbas, "What Does Reconciliation after Genocide Mean?"

¹⁶ Susan Thomson, "Whispering Truth to Power: The Everyday Resistance of Rwandan Peasants to Post-Genocide Reconciliation," *African Affairs* 110, no. 440 (2011), 439–56. Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror*.

¹⁷ Youth Connect is a Rwandan youth platform aimed at promoting unity and reconciliation.

Edouard Bamporiki came forward to apologize on behalf of his paternal uncle who had participated in the genocide. Encouraging other young Hutu to follow his example, Bamporiki called for them to “step out of the shadow of what was done by [their] parents.” In his view, “[apology] is an important tool not only for reconciliation, but also for sustained nation building.” His conviction is that “apology redeems people. If we don’t help the young people do away with this kind of shame, whoever is willing to harm government, or Rwandans for that matter, will find it easy to manipulate them.”¹⁸

In the weeks that followed Bamporiki’s apology, several government officials, including then serving Prime Minister Pierre-Damien Habumuremyi, also publicly apologized on behalf of Hutu *génocidaires*.¹⁹ Four months later, in November 2013, the call for public apologies was formalized with the launch of the program known as *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (I am Rwandan). This program includes as a resolution the statement that: “the genocide against Tutsis was committed in the name of Hutus, thus for the real healing of Rwandan society it is indispensable that Hutus whose name was used in the genocide crime apologize to Tutsi victims, denounce such acts and distance themselves from perpetrators, and fight clearly against the genocide ideology and ethnical divisionism.”²⁰ Paul Kagame’s government promotes *Ndi Umunyarwanda* as a program designed to rebuild trust by encouraging individuals to tell the truth about what happened in the genocide. In doing so, it aims to strengthen unity and reconciliation among the citizens of Rwanda. While supporters of the program stress that children of Hutu are encouraged rather than obliged to apologize on behalf of their parents, *Ndi Umunyarwanda* sits uncomfortably alongside the official policy of unity and reconciliation in Rwanda. In its published policy, the Rwandan government defines unity and reconciliation as “a consensus practice of citizens who have common nationality, who share the same culture and have equal rights; citizens characterized by trust, tolerance, mutual respect, equality, complementary roles/interdependence truth, and healing of one another’s wounds inflicted by history, with the objectives of laying a foundation for sustainable development.”²¹ The identification of Rwandan Hutu and their children as a different social group counters the government’s claim that “We are all Rwandans.”

According to the 2014 US Department of State’s Country report on Human Rights Practices in Rwanda, a number of observers have voiced concern that the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* program implies that all Rwandan Hutu were collectively responsible for the 1994 genocide and so risks exacerbating ethnic tensions in Rwanda.²² Indeed, critics of *Ndi Umunyarwanda* have argued that, rather than promoting national unity and

¹⁸ Felly Kimenyi, “We Need to Step out of Our Parents’ Shadows – Poet Bamporiki,” *The New Times Rwanda*, July 22, 2013, accessed January 10, 2017, <http://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/article/2013-07-22/67715/>.

¹⁹ “Apology: Singling out a Community over the Genocide is not Right - Opinion,” *The East African*, July 19, 2013, accessed January 10, 2017, <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/Rwanda/Opinion/Singling-out-a-community-over-the-genocide-is-not-right---/1433246/1919944/-/9r2nvz/-/index.html>.

²⁰ United Nations, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, accessed January 10, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2014humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=236394&year=2014#wrapper>.

²¹ The Rwandan Government: National Unit and Reconciliation Commission, *The National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation*, accessed January 10, 2017, http://www.nurc.gov.rw/index.php?id=70&tx_drblob_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=26&tx_drblob_pi1%5BbackPid%5D=70&cHash=c20f2fb5aa530ce0c74071b5585dfba2.

²² United Nations, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014*.

reconciliation, the program reinforces divisions in Rwandan society by associating all Rwandan Hutu with a sense of collective guilt. For example, Jean-Pierre Dusingizemungu, President of Ibuka, the umbrella organization for genocide survivors in Rwanda, has stated that not all Hutu should be asked to seek forgiveness, because not all Hutu committed genocide.²³ It is well known that many Hutu also died during the genocide, some of them killed for trying to protect friends and neighbors, others because they were married to Tutsi, or because they refused to participate in the killings.

The contradiction between a concept of national identity in which ethnic categories no longer exist (“I am Rwandan”) and a program specifically targeted at the Hutu is obvious. What it crystallizes is what many see as the stigmatization in post-genocide Rwanda of those formerly identified as Hutu. As Nigel Eltringham demonstrates in *Accounting for Horror*, there is a tendency to “globalize guilt according to ethnic identity.”²⁴ This, he warns, can have dangerous consequences since “the constructed image of two heterogeneous collectivities of “*the* Hutu” and “*the* Tutsi” central to genocidal propaganda can be easily overlaid by “*génocidaires*” (those who committed the genocide) and “*rescapés*” (survivors of the genocide).²⁵ In other words, Hutu becomes synonymous with perpetrator. Indeed, critics of Paul Kagame’s government, such as Jennie Burnet, condemn official commemorations of the 1994 genocide as “[perpetuating] generalizations of Tutsi as the innocent victims and Hutu as the bloodstained perpetrators.”²⁶ As an antidote to such generalizations, Burnet calls for a “more nuanced account of the genocide, the civil war, and the postgenocide period.”²⁷ Such an account, she argues, “yields a much more complicated history. Individual violent experiences during the civil war, genocide, or insurgency do not fit neatly into the dyadic Hutu perpetrator/Tutsi victim logic. Many Hutu died in the genocide because they opposed the extremist regime that chose genocide as its policy or because they “looked” Tutsi, because they were married to Tutsi or because they hid or protected Tutsi.”²⁸

For the Rwandan government, however, there is little room for ambiguity in the narrative of the genocide. Challenging those critics who offer alternative versions of the story, Kagame’s response is unequivocal: “Genocide happened in broad daylight and the population knows who is guilty and who is innocent of genocide crimes.”²⁹ As a consequence, any deviation from the official narrative can be viewed as an expression of genocide ideology.³⁰ Indeed, some researchers have even claimed that the law against

²³ “Genocide: Debate Rages on over Call for Apology,” *The East African*, July 20, 2013, accessed January 10, 2017, <http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/Genocide-Debate-rages-on-over-call-for-apology/-/2558/1920950/-/1213lpy/-/index.html>.

²⁴ Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror*, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.72.

²⁶ Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁹ Paul Kagame, preface to *After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda and Beyond*, ed. Phil Clark and Zachary D. Kaufman (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2009), xxiii.

³⁰ Waldorf, “Revisiting *Hotel Rwanda*.”

genocide ideology is used to silence civilians and political opponents who challenge government policy.³¹

Positioning in Relation to Government Policy

In the corpus of interviews discussed in this paper, there is no shortage of explicit references to the post-genocide narrative on unity and reconciliation imposed by the government. This appears to support Harré and Moghaddan's claim that the "positioning of one person or a category of persons can be brought about deliberately and as a matter of policy by someone else, or by some authority."³² It is clear that the interviewees had fully understood the government's narrative, to the extent that they were able to articulate the terms of the unity and reconciliation policy discussed above. What we cannot know, of course, is whether or not the individuals agree with the policy. For example, when asked at the end of her interview if there was a message she would like to give to other Rwandans, the wife of a convicted perpetrator explained:

"Rwandans have always lived together, helping one another, sharing with one another, giving cows and brides to another. We should keep on striving for the unity of Rwandans and not let them separate. So, what we would tell Rwandans in general is to stay united and to avoid anything that might separate us, and to once again live with one another and give cows and help one another; and keep coming together and sharing." (Association #8)

Echoing the government's narrative almost word for word, this woman's message for other Rwandans reiterates the claim that historical unity existed in Rwanda prior to foreign colonization. Furthermore, this is not an isolated case. For example, another survivor in a different association draws a similar conclusion:

"Before the genocide, just like our parents, we lived together in harmony with our neighbors and with our Hutu brothers. We saw our fathers offering cows to each other, they planned weddings together and they built houses together" (Association #5).

Such conformity is far less surprising however, when interpreted through the lens of positioning theory. The very act of deliberate positioning creates a moral duty to behave in accordance with a limited and socially approved repertoire of actions.³³ Some researchers have even argued that the NURC restricts freedom of speech in its citizens and is designed to sustain a generation of loyalists among the younger generations.³⁴ From our corpus it appears that the interviewed survivors recognized and accepted this

³¹ Filip Reyntjens, "Constructing the Truth, Dealing with Dissent, Domesticating the World: Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *African Affairs* 110, no. 438 (2011), 1–34.

³² Harré and Moghaddan, "Introduction: The Self and Others in Traditional Psychology and in Positioning Theory," 7.

³³ Harré, "Positioning Theory: Moral Dimensions of Social-Cultural Psychology."

³⁴ Reyntjens, "Constructing the Truth, Dealing with Dissent, Domesticating the World." Chi Mgbako, "Ingando Solidarity Camps: Reconciliation and Political Indoctrination in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 18 (2005), 201–224.

duty. The survivors encouraged other Rwandans to forgive and reconcile “...because there is no other way” (Association #9). One survivor conveyed this sense of duty very clearly:

“[...] There is nothing the commission of unity hasn’t done either for genocide survivors or those who participated in the genocide. So, I think we should not be a burden, but be like its children, like a parent and their children. When a parent is guiding their children, they must listen. That is why we also should listen to the commission of unity when it encourages us to do things in harmony and not be a burden to it.” (Association #3)

In this example, we see that some survivors are so keen to comply with the government’s message that they claim to be willing to give up their own agency in order to comply with what is requested of them, putting themselves in the position of children listening to a well-intentioned parent. Other survivors speak about the possible consequences of not complying with expectations: for example, one woman describes how she was labelled as an “angry person” and had previously been ostracized from her community until she joined her association (Association #1). In her interview this woman discusses how she had difficulty buying vegetables from Hutu sellers in the market and received no support from other survivors, as they believed her to have a “bad attitude”.

The duty to uphold the policy of reconciliation is also mirrored in perpetrators, all of who are eager to demonstrate that they now abide by the societal norms of social cohesion and unity. For example, when a convicted perpetrator, now released from prison, was asked to compare his life in prison to his present life, he responded by saying:

“Now I feel like I am Rwandan, because when I was in prison I was depressed. I felt Rwandan when I joined [gives name of association] that was founded by our elders who had thought about the people from [he gives the name of his village] who were in prison.” (Association #5)

Thus, it appears that this former perpetrator is showing his support for the NURC’s policy by saying that he now views himself as Rwandan (rather than Hutu). The repeated reiterations of the government narrative in our analysis point to the way in which the Rwandan government has cultivated among its citizens a shared societal obligation for people to identify as Rwandan in order to forgive and reconcile with one another. The obligation to forgive has been identified by other researchers, most notably Thomson who, on the basis of fieldwork carried out during the *gacaca* community trials in 2006, reported that some survivors had admitted to giving false testimony when government officials attended the trials as a way of demonstrating their commitment to this policy.³⁵ Such evidence leads us to the important question of why Rwandans citizens appear to endorse the post-genocide narrative so strongly. Some existing research would provide an answer to this question by suggesting that the government has created an environment where blind conformity is the only possible (or sensible) response. For example, Waldorf has argued that any deviation from the government’s narrative is viewed as an expression

³⁵ Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*, 2013.

of negationism or genocide ideology;³⁶ others have argued that government policy is used to restrict freedom of speech and promote indoctrination.³⁷ Certainly, the approach taken to the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* program reviewed in the previous section would seem to support such conclusions. However, our analysis of interviews with members of community associations also points to another reason why ordinary citizens choose to uphold this policy; a more pragmatic reason.

Following a Presidential decree in January 2003, in which thousands of convicted perpetrators returned home after their release from prison, survivors found themselves in the position of having to live alongside people who had killed their loved ones.³⁸ It was this situation paired with the motivation to prevent further violence that gave some survivors the courage to form associations that worked towards unity and reconciliation in their own communities. In fact, survivors started seven of the ten associations in our corpus. For these survivors, reconciliation was a long and difficult process that occurred slowly over many years as they learned to trust one another again, initially by working together on mutually beneficial projects in these associations. This sentiment is clearly articulated by the founding member of one of the associations:

“We started to accept our new life. Let me be quick and say that we got to a point where we started thinking of doing activities concerning development, because we had learned that when people work together doubt goes away fast.... The houses were built and we lived in them, but we also had to have things we could all do together which would help us to be together most of the time; so that no one goes around thinking to themselves: he is a Tutsi.” (Association #2)

This reasoning is consistent with a model of reconciliation proposed by psychologists Nadler and Shnabel, in which they propose that a positive change to the identities of both groups is facilitated through sustained cooperation on activities that are beneficial to all involved.³⁹ Such gradual changes in trust and respect for the other group were also mirrored in some of the interviews with perpetrators. For example, one perpetrator talked about how the activities of the association had helped him to identify with the survivors and re-evaluate what he had previously been told by both his parents and teachers in school. He ends his interview by saying: “So I found that, I found that we really fought over nothing!” (Association #4). It is our contention that these extracts challenge the view that upholding the government’s narrative can simply be reduced to a process of blind conformity or indoctrination. Instead, our conclusions are consistent with one attitude towards reconciliation identified by Moss and Vollhardt, which they classify as a

³⁶ Waldorf, “Revisiting *Hotel Rwanda*.”

³⁷ Reyntjens, “Constructing the Truth, Dealing with Dissent, Domesticating the World.” Mgbako, “Ingando Solidarity Camps.”

³⁸ Eugenia Zorbas, “Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *African Journal of Legal Studies* 1, no. 1 (2004), 29–52.

³⁹ Arie Nadler and Nurit Shnabel, “Instrumental and Socioemotional Paths to Intergroup Reconciliation and the Needs-Based Model of Socioemotional Reconciliation,” in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Reconciliation*, ed. Arie Nadler, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 37–56.

utilitarian response.⁴⁰ Based on data derived from fifty-six interviews with ordinary Rwandan citizens, Moss and Vollhardt found that some individuals justified a shared Rwandan identity with a pragmatic concern for sustaining peace and rebuilding Rwanda. As such, individuals support government polices because they believe they provide them with continued political stability and economic development. This attitude is repeatedly expressed by the interviewees in our corpus: for example, when the child of a perpetrator is asked why she was motivated to persuade her father to confess and ask for forgiveness, she says: “I said: what happened will never happen again” (Association #3), which shows a concern with maintaining peace and stability. A survivor conveys a utilitarian response more explicitly: “What I can add is when a country has peace and food and water to drink, then people will not murder each other” (Association #2).

Social and Political Implications

Despite the positioning of reconciliation as a civic duty to uphold, many of the individuals in our corpus report various social and psychological benefits from their participation in the unity and reconciliation associations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, perpetrators and their family members acknowledge how their participation has enabled their re-integration into society and reduced perceptions of resentment towards them. For example, when asked how the association had helped him personally, a perpetrator explained:

“At first I was afraid of them [the survivors in the association], but they were welcoming as most of us have known each other since we were children. We know each other, we are neighbors. They made me less afraid and we talked and talked, and they took us to training sessions. Now when I see a Tutsi, I see myself.” (Association #6)

However, the social and emotional benefits are not limited to the perpetrators and their relatives; in fact, some survivors claimed that the grief and pain that had been weighing on them since the genocide had been eased through their participation in an association. Many survivors talked about how associations had given them both a place to share their stories with other survivors and a safe environment where their pain could be heard and recognized by those who had inflicted it. Over time these environments have allowed some perpetrators to come forward and share information with survivors about where their family members had been killed or what had happened to their family’s property. Thus, the survivors whose agency and power had been taken from them during the genocide were re-empowered by this knowledge and by the perpetrators’ acknowledgment of the harm caused by their actions.⁴¹ One survivor discussed how her

⁴⁰ Sigrun Marie Moss and Johanna Ray Vollhardt, “You Can’t Give a Syringe with Unity”: Rwandan Responses to the Government’s Single Recategorization Policies,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 16, no. 1 (2016), 325–59.

⁴¹ Nadler and Shnabel, “Instrumental and Socioemotional Paths to Intergroup Reconciliation and the Needs-Based Model of Socioemotional Reconciliation.”

participation in the association had helped to alleviate the physical symptoms she endured because of the trauma:

“Unity and reconciliation is good, it frees one’s heart because I told you before that I used to have constant headaches, but the days went by and as I kept talking to them, those things that burdened my head are not there. Yes, you can’t forget what happened to you, but you get relief.” (Association #9)

In these situations, empathy acts as a shared emotional process, in which both a survivor and a perpetrator identify with and respond to the pain of the other. The survivor feels the remorse felt by the perpetrator, and the perpetrator takes responsibility for the harm caused by his or her actions.⁴² Researchers have reported evidence of the healing power of forgiveness and reconciliation in Rwanda. For example, in a sample of one hundred survivors, Mukashema and Mullet found that holding an attitude towards reconciliation characterized by a renewed motivation to live and work together was associated with improved mental health.⁴³ In our corpus we also found some survivors reporting that this shared connection had made them feel responsible for the social welfare of others in their community. For example, when discussing how the association had begun, one survivor explained how the two groups (in this case, survivors and women whose husbands had been imprisoned for genocide crimes) had learned to acknowledge one another’s suffering:

“After the women came together, we put our problems together. We felt like... Both sides listened to each other and you understood that even if the other women’s husbands had hurt us, those women have problems today.” (Association #8)

Survivors recognized that the wounds of the genocide, although not equivalent, extended beyond their own, and they started to feel responsible for ensuring that conditions within Rwanda improved so that history would never be repeated. In psychological research, this kind of response has been termed inclusive altruism born of suffering, which refers to instances when the motivation to help others extends beyond one’s own in-group.⁴⁴ In our analysis, this notion is strongly underpinned by the reasons most Rwandans in our corpus gave for supporting the policies of the NURC, as outlined in the previous section.

Although the individuals in our corpus reported experiencing benefits, it is important to consider the potential harm of the positioning imposed by the NURC. Our data is not comprehensive in terms of the viewpoints represented; as previously mentioned, the interviews were conducted with the purpose of showcasing successful stories of unity and reconciliation. It is therefore unsurprising that it does not include the

⁴² Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, “Remorse, Forgiveness, and Rehumanization: Stories from South Africa,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2002), 7–32.

⁴³ Immaculee Mukashema and Etienne Mullet, “Reconciliation Sentiment Among Victims of Genocide in Rwanda: Conceptualizations, and Relationships with Mental Health,” *Social Indicators Research* 99, no. 1 (2010), 25–39.

⁴⁴ Johanna R. Vollhardt and Ervin Staub, “Inclusive Altruism Born of Suffering: The Relationship between Adversity and Prosocial Attitudes and Behavior toward Disadvantaged Outgroups” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 81, no. 3 (2011), 307–15.

views of people who actively resist or subtly challenge the narrative and positioning of the NURC. By contrast, Thomson's research has revealed that some Rwandans find subtle ways to communicate their dislike of what she refers to as the obligation to forgive.⁴⁵ In her study of the *gacaca* trials, she reported some survivors covertly undermining the Rwandan authorities by laughing out loud during a perpetrator's confession or by glaring at officials to signal their contempt. Such subtle acts of resistance demonstrated that, at least for some people, the desire for reconciliation was far from genuine and represented a government-imposed reality. Positioning can be harmful for people who resist or challenge the post-genocide narrative, as was shown to a certain extent in our interviews through the words of the survivor who had experienced social isolation before joining associations for unity and reconciliation.

The harmful effects of rejecting or challenging the cultural storyline have been outlined in a recent theory of identity development. McLean and Syed's theory draws upon the narrative approach in psychology, which conceptualizes identity as the process of developing a coherent life narrative that connects past, present and future selves across time and across contexts.⁴⁶ McLean and Syed claim that an individual's life story is constructed in relation to the cultural storyline (or master narrative). That is, an individual's personal identity is deeply informed by the beliefs and values embedded in the master narrative, given that the master narrative provides a culturally shared story of what it means to be a good and valued member of society. Individuals whose personal narratives deviate from this master narrative are at risk of not belonging and as such can find themselves ostracized or excluded by others. Of note here, some scholars have claimed that mass involvement of civilians in the genocide was in part a function of a culture that cultivated a strong need to conform and obey authority.⁴⁷ In which case, the positioning of reconciliation as a moral duty becomes particularly problematic for people who disagree with the NURC narrative. Further research is needed to identify what alternative narratives individuals construct in an attempt to avoid political and social exclusion. We did not find any evidence of such narratives, which is likely a result of the fact that our interviews were collected by the Genocide Archive of Rwanda.

Another issue with the positioning created by NURC policies is the implicit association between Hutu heritage and the transmission of guilt to younger generations. It was evident from one of our interviews that a child of an imprisoned perpetrator felt the need to rid herself of suspicion by joining an association and also by encouraging her father to confess his crimes and ask for forgiveness from those he had harmed. She tells the interviewer that she joined the association because "as a child, everywhere I passed people said: 'look, the interahamwe just passed by.'" (Association #3). This child's fear is further contextualized and understood in the light of Mukashema and Mullet's recently published survey study of Rwandan people's perceptions of guilt in the children of perpetrators.⁴⁸ Mukashema and Mullet reported that a small minority of their sample did

⁴⁵ Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*, 2013.

⁴⁶ Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed, "Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context," *Human Development* 58, no. 6 (2016), 318–49.

⁴⁷ Smeulders and Hoex, "Studying the Microdynamics of the Rwandan Genocide."

⁴⁸ Immaculée Mukashema and Etienne Mullet, "Attribution of Guilt to Offspring of Perpetrators of the Genocide: Rwandan People's Perspectives," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2015), 75–98.

attribute guilt to the child of a convicted perpetrator, particularly if it was the child's father who had committed the crimes.

Conclusion

While the unity and reconciliation associations are clearly producing positive results in terms of building a peaceful future for Rwanda, our analysis of ten oral interviews with members of unity and reconciliation associations has shown that individuals sometimes align themselves with the government's storyline for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, namely to avoid further violence or genocide and uphold peace for the sake of the country's youth. More concerning are findings that suggest that the Rwandan government's unity and reconciliation program will reinforce the Hutu's social positioning as *génocidaires*, particularly when we consider the master narrative alongside such initiatives as the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* program. If the current emphasis in Rwanda on apology continues to go hand in hand with the narrative of unity and reconciliation, then Hutu guilt is likely to be passed on to future generations. Furthermore, ethnographic research by Hilker has shown that youth in Kigali continue to look for information on and classify other youth as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa, a finding that undermines the progress made in the NURC storyline.⁴⁹ Although this evidence does not seem to prevent the younger generation from forming inter-ethnic friendships, it nevertheless does demonstrate that 'ethnicity' is still a prevalent factor in the social construction of identity in Rwandan youth. The perceived transmission of Hutu guilt will ultimately undermine any real chance the government has at eliminating ethnic labels and creating an equal and cohesive society. Even Edouard Bamporiki who is committed to *Ndi Umunyarwanda*, acknowledges the ongoing stigmatization of being Hutu in post-genocide Rwanda. In 2013, he spoke to Maggie Ziegler about what he sees as the shame of being Hutu. He told her,

“Nineteen years is not enough time to forget this Hutu and Tutsi; I know that some are not happy to be Hutu because what was done by Hutu during the genocide brings shame to their relatives and friends. If you could change your identity you would see that more people would want to be like a survivor, a Tutsi.”⁵⁰

If Rwanda is to achieve its UN Sustainable Development Goal of promoting a just, peaceful and inclusive society, then it cannot ignore what some see as the stigmatization of being identified as Hutu. Social positioning in the national storyline can reinforce this stigma. Unity and reconciliation must not be at the expense of social stigmatization, which risks reinforcing the so-called ethnic differences the government claims to want to eradicate.

⁴⁹ Lyndsay McLean Hilker, “Everyday Ethnicities: Identity and Reconciliation among Rwandan Youth,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 1 (2009), 81–100.

⁵⁰ Maggie Ziegler, “Breaking the Silence on the Rwanda Genocide: An Interview with Edouard Bamporiki,” *Peace Magazine*, July-September 2013, 13.

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